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The President's Last Easter Service

By Rev. Wm. C. Robinson, D.D.*

Warm Springs Foundation Chapel
Easter Sunday, April 1, 1945
Order Of Service

Organ Prelude.

Opening Sentences.

Invocation, followed by The Lord's Prayer.

Hymn 168: "Come, Ye Faithful, Raise the Strain."

Responsive Reading: Selection 69, Page 598.

I Cor. 15. Selected verses.

Anthem: "In Joseph's Lovely Garden."

Hymn 166: "The Day of Resurrection."

Scripture Reading: Hebrews 1:1-8; 2:9-18; 5:7-8.

Solo: Mr. Fred Botts, "Open the Gates."

Prayer:

Anthem: "God So Loved the World."

Hymn 164: "The Strife Is O'er, The Battle Done."

Sermon: "God Incarnate for Suffering Men."

By Rev. William C. Robinson, D.D.

Prayer, including Prayer for our Armed Forces.

Hymn 190: "Crown Him With Many Crowns."

Benediction.

President Franklin D. Roosevelt spent his last Easter at the Little White House and attended the morning worship at the Warm Springs Foundation Chapel. About a minute before eleven two cars drove up, the guards from the second surrounded the first as it came to a halt. The President was rolled in in a wheel chair and was helped into the third pew from the front on the left of the aisle. He was accompanied by two of his cousins in a party of perhaps six. At the conclusion of the service we all remained in our places until he had been helped into his chair and wheeled out. The Chapel was filled with chairs in every available place. The President was a most attentive and responsive listener.

The message was "God Incarnate For Suffering Men." This sermon as published in the March issue of *The Southern Presbyterian Journal* was adapted to the occasion. In place of the reference to Chicamauga and to Gettysburg the introduction included this sentence: "The problem of pain which has long been with you at Warm Springs has become a nation wide problem."

The President's Last Easter Worship was a unique service. It was held in a unique Chapel of Episcopal architecture given by Miss Georgia Wilkins of Columbus. The whole front of the auditorium is free of pews so that the patients may be rolled in on stretchers or in wheel chairs. There is no standing in the service since that would make a distinction between those who can and those who cannot stand. The organ and the piano perfectly harmonize and together they accompanied the choir of Warm Springs patients.

The service was unique in that the President made the strenuous exertions necessary to place himself in his pew for the hour of worship. He goes to Warm Springs when he needs to rest and

often does not make the extra effort to get out to public worship. His presence was a living inspiration to every sufferer in the Foundation. Here was one afflicted as they were, but one who had attained the highest pinnacle of world leadership.

It has been my privilege to preach at Warm Springs several Easters, but this is the only time I have had the President in the congregation. When the Chief Magistrate's call came there were strong inward "tugs" to help by serving as a Chaplain, but Providence has kept me at the task of training others as ministers and chaplains. I am happy to have had one opportunity and that the final one to strengthen the President's hand in God. Perhaps I did not miss my unique opportunity, for I am in receipt of a letter from Mr. Roosevelt written the day before his death in which he says: "That was indeed a grand service and it was wonderful that you could participate."

One likes to think that there at Warm Springs, where the charities of his heart and hand overflowed, surrounded by some seventy-five fellow polio sufferers, was the place he would have chosen for his last hour of public worship on this earth. Yes, as the news of victories on land and sea were pouring in, and as the notes of triumphant gladness rose from that choir of polio patients who like himself were winning the fight against this disease, one concludes that this was as well the unique occasion he would have elected for a victorious conclusion to a great life.

The President's last Easter worship was a triumphant service. The Responsive Reading was the selection from the fifteenth chapter of First Corinthians found in the Hymnal of the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A. Among the Opening Sentences were these: Now is Christ risen from the dead and become the first fruits of them that slept. Behooved it not the Christ to suffer and to enter into His glory? If we suffer with Him, we shall also reign with Him. Every one of the hymns, the anthems and the solo were eloquent with the notes of Resurrection triumph.

"Come ye faithful, raise the strain
Of triumphant gladness:
God has brought His people forth
Into joy from sadness.
Now rejoice, Jerusalem,
And with true affection
Welcome in unwearied strains
Jesus' Resurrection."

* * *
"Open the gates of the Temple . . .
I know that my Redeemer liveth."

* * *
"In Joseph's Lovely Garden."

* * *
"God so loved the World."

* * *
"The day of resurrection!
Earth, tell it out abroad;
The Passover of gladness,
The Passover of God."

From death to life eternal,
From this world to the sky,
Our Christ hath brought us over
With hymns of victory."

* * *

"Alleluia! Alleluia! Alleluia!
The strife is o'er, the battle done;
The victory of life is won;
The song of triumph has begun.
Alleluia!"

Finally came the great coronation hymn:

"Crown Him with many crowns,
The Lamb upon His throne!
Hark how the heavenly anthem drowns
All music but its own!
Awake my soul, and sing
Of Him who died for thee,
And hail Him as thy matchless King
Through all eternity!"

The President's last Easter worship was a Christian service. As the service was closed with the apostolic benediction, so it was opened with the Christian salutation, Grace be unto you and peace from God our Father and from the Lord Jesus Christ. The prayer included the petition that as God in His mercy had forgiven us, His rebellious creatures, for Christ's sake, so He would put it into our hearts to exercise mercy as well as judgment in shaping the peace of the world.

The Incarnation of God, the central Christian affirmation, was the theme of the Easter sermon. As the music was redolent with Christ's Resurrection, so the sermon was steeped in His suffering and dying for our sins. And these two great events—Christ's death for our sins and His rising again the third day—are the Christian Gospel. Or, to quote the sermon: "The Lord of glory of His own will entered into our life of grief and suffering, and for love of men bore all and more than all that men may be called to bear." "He suffered as the Lamb of God for the sins of the world." "He was delivered for our offenses and raised for our justification. Therefore,

"In peace let me resign my breath
And Thy salvation see:
My sins deserved eternal death,
But Jesus died for me."

The President's last Easter worship was designed as a service of comfort and strength. Today when shoulders are bowed beneath a load of responsibilities and hearts are breaking with anxiety for loved ones, we preachers need, as we have never needed before, the exhortation of the Prophet Isaiah: "Comfort ye, comfort ye my people saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Zion." Of the Easter Service Dr. George Huntington has kindly written: "I am sure that the whole service must have helped and rested and blessed the President."

Since the closing verse of the responsive reading seemed peculiarly appropriate for him, I spoke directly to the President as I read: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye steadfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, for-

asmuch as ye know that your labor is not in vain in the Lord."

My wife, who sat just behind Mr. Roosevelt, noticed that he was especially moved by the prayer for the President of the United States. The minister prayed that God would bless the President with the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, of counsel and of might, of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord. A later letter added the prayer, "As your days may demand, may your strength ever be!"

The purpose of the sermon was to present God who took our flesh and blood that He might suffer with, as well as for, many whose flesh is being torn and whose blood is being shed in this global war. Moreover, the Epistle to the Hebrews shows our Lord so really taking our nature that He lived His human life trusting in God. He offered up strong crying and tears unto Him who was able to save Him from death and was heard for His godly fear. Thus He is the understanding High Priest who sympathizes with us in our anxieties and holds on the staunch when our hearts are breaking. The vast diamond studded Milky Way is but as "dust from the Almighty's moving Chariot Wheels"; and yet in all our affliction He is afflicted and the angel of His presence saves us.

The section of the sermon presenting Christ as tasting death for every man that He might deliver us from the fear of death was elaborated more than appears in the published copy, thus:

With rare literary skill, the Honorable John Hay, sometime Secretary of State, portrayed death as **The Stirrup Cup** which the cavalry officer used to drink as he mounted his steed.

"My short and happy day is done,
The long and lonely night comes on;
And at my door the pale horse stands
To bear me forth to unknown lands."

General E. P. Alexander took up the imagery, but breathed into the figure something of his own dauntless daring.

"But storm and gloom and mystery
Shall only nerve my courage high.
Who thro' life's scenes hath borne his part
May face its close with tranquil heart."

Into the same picture the Rev. James Powers Smith, who as an aid-de-camp to Stonewall Jackson had ridden through the valley of the shadow of many a death, wrote the faith which alone can give a tranquil heart.

"The pale horse stands and will not bide,
The night has come and I must ride;
But not alone to unknown lands,
My Friend goes with me holding hands."

These last four lines were spoken directly to the President and followed by the affirmation that Christ our Friend had gone through the strait gate of His death for us that thereafter He might go through the gate of our death with us. As I thus used the President's favorite phrase, My Friend, I am certain there was an understanding

and a trusting response in his face.

The sermon closed with the story of a mother whose son went down in the S-26 of Panama. When the Old First Church held its memorial service for this lad, on Easter three years ago, she wrote:

"God has given me a guiding light,
A star called Faith
'That substance of things hoped for,
'That evidence of things not seen.'
And now within me peace and joy are born,
For some day there shall come a Resurrection morn!
And I shall see again and know my son."

I mailed the President a copy of a little booklet in which this poem is quoted. In reply Mr. Roose-

velt said: "I am very glad to have that copy of your sermon: 'The Faith of a Soldier', because it gives me in permanent form that very appropriate poem which you embodied in your Easter sermon." Gold-star Mother, the song you learned in your sorrow was the arrow that pointed the eye of the Commander-in-Chief Godward as he left this life. No doubt it has likewise pointed the eyes of many of our soldiers and sailors to the gates of glory.

It is not likely that I shall ever again preach to a President of the United States, but I may well remember that the King of Kings is always in the audience and that I ought to preach Him as in **His Presence**.

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Is The Presbyterian Church (U.S.) A Sectional Church?

By Rev. B. M. Larson, D.D.*

In the issue of May 25, 1944, THE PRESBYTERIAN, of Philadelphia, Pa., carried an article by the Rev. R. C. Rankin, Pastor of the Watauga Avenue Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., Johnson City, Tenn., in which he charges the Presbyterian Church in the United States with sectionalism and makes some rather critical remarks about his Southern neighbors. After waiting several months for some one in the Presbyterian Church, U.S.A., to take notice of the article of Dr. Rankin, a courteous reply was made by Rev. B. M. Larson, Knoxville, Tenn., and published in THE PRESBYTERIAN on April 12, 1945. Dr. Larson's article is reproduced in THE SOUTHERN PRESBYTERIAN JOURNAL for our readers. —H.B.D.

This question is prompted by an article in The Presbyterian of May 25, 1944, written by a Presbyterian, U.S.A., minister serving a church of his communion in a Southern State, in which he rebukes a minister of his own Church for intimating in an article in The Christian Century that Presbyterian, U.S.A., churches in the South should be encouraged to unite with the Southern Assembly, stating that "there is no more reason for the Northern Church to have a Synod of Florida than there would be for the Southern Church to compete in Ohio."

The writer of the article in The Presbyterian vigorously dissents from this suggestion, which he characterizes as a surrender to the "expediency of sectionalism" and says: "Our duty is clear,—to say to our members in the North and West, 'You are members of a National Presbyterian Church. When you move South, find your own Church if possible!' And we should say to the people of the South, 'Our Church is a National Church; it is opposed to sectionalism any where. If you believe in the union of the Presbyterian Church and in its being above political and sectional prejudices, join the U. S. A. Church.'"

The article from which these statements are taken is one of considerable length. In speaking of ministers and members of the Presbyterian Church in the United States, the author uses such terms as, "prejudiced U. S. zealots," "preaching sectionalism," "promoting sectionalism,"

"limited experience and information due to sectionalism," "the weakness of the Church (Southern) is that which has grown out of sectionalism," "provincialism, which, in our day of widening horizons, is tragic."

The meaning of these phrases is in no sense changed by lifting them out of their immediate context, but clearly represent the mind of the writer. Whether these aspersions on the Southern Presbyterian Church have the approval of the distinguished editor of The Presbyterian is not stated.

The Assemblies of 1889 recommended: "That persons connected with churches under the care of one of these Assemblies who may remove into the bounds of churches under the care of the other Assembly, be advised to unite with those churches and to seek their peace and prosperity."

If the policy of following its own, proposed by this critic of the South, had been pursued by the Southern Assembly, whose members, in large numbers including many able ministers, for three quarters of a century have been moving North and East and West to strengthen the churches of other denominations, the Presbyterian Church in the United States would have been extended into all parts of the country as a rival and competing Presbyterian denomination. The official name of the Church is perfectly adaptable to such an extension. The Assembly of 1866 in adopting a name for the Church, chose the term "United States"